

Combining social media and career development learning: An intensive tertiary preparation program for disadvantaged youth¹

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Abstract

The Tertiary Preparation Program Intensive School (TPPIS) for Year 12 school leavers offered young people from low socio-economic status (LSES) backgrounds an alternative pathway to university, a second chance at tertiary entrance and ultimately for some, a fast track to a better future. The intensive program not only focuses on teaching academic communication, mathematics and study management skills but also the importance of career development whilst aiming to raise the aspirations of disadvantaged students. By incorporating social media into the teaching toolkit there were increased opportunities for non-traditional students (from LSES backgrounds who finished high school without an OP) to transition to university culture and to expand their social networks. These strong social support networks are an important factor determining career development and study success, especially for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The program has succeeded in realising the potential of this student group with more than 80% of participants moving on to tertiary study.

Keywords

Career development, social media, social capital, raising aspirations, widening participation, low socio-economic status, careers counselling

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The University of Southern Queensland's (USQ) Open Access College has long offered a Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) which gives individuals the skills they require for tertiary study and guaranteed entry to a USQ undergraduate degree. In order to meet the needs of another cohort of school leavers USQ Toowoomba campus trialled an Intensive mode TPP for Year 12 students who had not met undergraduate entry requirements through their Year 12 studies. The program which was funded through the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP) 2011 Partnerships Competitive Grant Process was offered with the intention of widening participation and raising aspirations of recently finished Year 12 school leavers from low SES schools. Through innovative teaching techniques such as the use of a closed group within the Social Media Networking site *Facebook* to create an 'always on' or '24/7' learning culture of social exchanges, the TPP Intensive School produced a number of surprising and positive outcomes across both academic development and social integration.

The students who participated in the first University of Southern Queensland TPP Intensive School were a small group of twenty 17-18 year olds from identified low SES secondary schools across Toowoomba, Brisbane and Ipswich, with some students from smaller rural towns such as Millmerran and Pittsworth. The USQ TPP Intensive School provides not only fee-free tuition, but free transport to and from campus, accommodation in the University Residential College for those who require it, and meals and social activities for participating students.

The first TPP Intensive students faced challenges that exceeded the usual obstacles faced by young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Having just completed Year 12, these young people did not have the same opportunity to mature over a long summer holiday which other university students enjoy. Many had never been away from home before and did not know anyone else enrolled in the program. As well as adapting to a fast paced and fast tracked academic schedule within a culture of independent learning, the students also needed to acclimatise to sharing accommodation and meal times with their peers within the culture of the residential colleges. Transitioning into University study can be problematic for students particularly those who are first in family to attend, have come from low socio-

economic circumstances, have had poor or little academic preparation and essentially lack any clear goals or direction (Rendon, 1995). The focus of this intensive program was certainly to address these potential barriers by providing an experience that could accommodate both academic and personal requirements. Pastoral care was an important aspect of the program and this was enhanced by having a Residential Adviser housed with the students who coordinated social activities and assisted the group after hours with study sessions. A USQ TPP lecturer also stayed in the Residential College during the intensive block to assist students after hours if required with academic skills, assessment and transition issues. The student support officers who were coordinating the program and activities met with the students every morning before class to ensure there were no problems and to discuss the routine for the day and any events or activities that were coming up.

As lecturers within this intensive pre-tertiary bridging program the challenge was to teach not only the mathematical, academic communication, study management and career development skills the students would need to complete an undergraduate degree but also to provide a social and cultural experience which would help these students settle into university life.

Integration of Social Media Site '*Facebook*'

To initiate communication with this group of students before they attended their on campus intensive block it was decided that a useful way to do this was to set up a closed group within the Social Media site, *Facebook*. Students were invited to join this group and interact with academic staff and other students before actually meeting one another face to face. For this small specialised group of teenagers and young adults our use of *Facebook* proved a great success as it facilitated and fast tracked both learning management and social integration.

There was immediate uptake and use of the site by the majority of the students who already had *Facebook* accounts and profiles. Notifications were placed on the site in relation to arrival at campus, orientation and planned social events. By the first day of teaching during the Intensive school block students had uploaded and shared

photos of each other and their new environment. Informal peer learning had also begun in response to teaching resources uploaded. Teaching resources uploaded included youtube USQ videos on “understanding uni jargon 101”, lecture powerpoints, assessment templates and marking criteria, reminders about due dates, group feedback, relevant web links, hot topic points and questions to grow group discussions. The *Facebook* site also proved invaluable for administration updates and pastoral care support, advice and information about social activities and theme park trips, accommodation issues and important dates, how to read results, how to register for classes during O week and general information on direct entry applications. In a tertiary environment that can appear overwhelming and intimidating to LSES students, the TPPIS Facebook site became a ‘friendly face.’ As research conducted by Clare, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009, p. 141) into the experience of British university undergraduates suggests, ‘once at university, Facebook was part of the ‘social glue’ that helped students settle into university life.’ As most were already familiar with the informal language and “friending” conventions of this social technology in their everyday social lives they were comfortable using it to aid their transition to higher education (Clare, Meek, Wellens and Hooley 2009, p.141).

In post-program evaluation surveys of the USQ tertiary preparation intensive school (USQ TPPIS), 67% of respondents rated the *Facebook* TPP Intensive site as “Excellent” while 33% rated it “Good”. Even after accessing the official online Learning Management System the students tended to check their *Facebook* profiles more regularly than the USQ Study Desk and their USQ email accounts through their ever-present ‘smart’ phones and other mobile, personal, ‘always on’ communication technologies.

Students commented:

“Facebook site... Love it!”

“[The TPP Intensive School Facebook site was...] Simple. Reliable way to communicate with friends and teachers.”

“I never once used the Study Desk Social Forum so I preferenced it as 6th because I feel Facebook was much more beneficial as with face-to-face.”

The *Facebook* site has allowed us to chart the growth of the students as, even after graduation, they continue to visit the site to support each other, share information and compare their experiences of undergraduate study. Using *Facebook* groups in particular allows us as teachers to see exactly which students have viewed which posts, and in most cases they are prompted by the newsfeed style to post their first and immediate responses and replies. In the case of the TPPIS closed group page, the use of social media has facilitated social links based on mutual benefit, mutual trust, reciprocity and collaboration among group members. These strong social support networks are an important factor determining career and study success, especially for young people. In particular young people from LSES backgrounds are less likely to have access to social networks which value educational achievement and facilitate successful transitions to career opportunities. In the informal language and conventions of Facebook, the TPPIS page demystified the tertiary experience for first-in-family students and continues to provide these alternative pathway non-OP students with a sense of connectedness and belonging as the group establishes new norms of academic success.

Social Capital and Career Development

Career Development Practitioners understand that students need more than educational credentials or educational 'capital' to successfully manage their lifelong career development; they also need social networks or social capital. For the Digital generation *Facebook* is a useful tool for developing this social networking asset alongside the development of their academic skill sets. Not only is a sense of social cohesion and connectedness useful in the short term of a preparatory course, the capacity to network and maintain mutually beneficial social relationships is increasingly essential for long term career success. Now that individuals are responsible largely for managing their own careers it would appear that to improve their own success it is 'imperative that people develop networking skills' (Sommerlund & Boutaiba, 2007, p. 536 as cited in Strehlke, 2010). These networking skills will enhance the individual's social capital. Career development practitioners are already heavily involved with the use of ICT to improve services to clients and teaching people

to use social networking media to assist with job search strategies. The internet is a powerful tool in being able to offer individuals access to a career resource library, a marketplace of opportunities and a space for exchange of social capital (Hooley, 2012). It is necessary therefore to provide instruction to students in the benefits and use of these tools to assist their career development. Students without social capital are more likely to feel isolated and disconnected and may ultimately drop out. In post-industrial workplaces where employees are increasingly expected to be flexible, mobile, entrepreneurial and adaptable, online or 'virtual' social capital can also help smooth transitions and maximise career opportunities. Virtual social capital is an emerging and multidimensional concept which is difficult to measure empirically and explicitly at this point in the project as the students have just begun the life long process of establishing the social networks which will support them throughout their undergraduate programs and future careers. There is evidence however of continued participation and social exchanges on the TPPIS closed group facebook page as students regularly revisit the site to cement their sense of solidarity and connectedness, to maintain friendships, to use their peers as a resource, to request help, to provide help, to discuss undergraduate courses and to make contributions of information and support which benefit the group as a whole.

Preparatory programs which aim to improve life chances and facilitate social mobility for disadvantaged groups may need to take social networking seriously and explicitly as a skill which can be learned and practiced. Bridging the gap, is often about making connections, not just obtaining credentials. It follows that 'virtual' social capital or making links online through social networking sites may be just as important, for young people especially, as more formal and traditional forums and networks. Not all young people from disadvantaged backgrounds will have the digital literacy skills to enable their proactive use of social media. This lack of skill in this area can therefore deepen the disadvantage as they do not know how to use the tools which essentially makes it more difficult to access the labour market (Hooley, 2012). In the USQ TPPIS we have extended the process recommended by Clare et al. (2009) in assisting low SES students to reflexively recognise the skills they develop as part of the social integration and informal learning fostered by *Facebook*.

Career Development Learning within the TPP

Career development is an important aspect of the TPP program with curriculum written to cover competencies mapped out in the Australian Blueprint of Career Development (ABCD). The competencies covered in the program are aimed at both adults and students in senior/post compulsory school or its equivalent. The students' exposure to the TPP Intensive Group *Facebook* site complemented the work within the 'Developing and Maintaining Positive Self-concept' competency. The students' self-concept was partially established and assisted by their Facebook profiles as they explored and exchanged potential new 'selves' and potential new futures online. As social media can facilitate a relatively easy way to communicate and receive feedback between peers, adolescents' attitudes in relation to themselves may be affected by using social media (Pempek et al., 2009 as cited in Sponcil & Gitimu, 2012). It is important to model the appropriate and positive use of the Social Media site as was done throughout the course by the academic staff contributions. Students were using the site to communicate about the course and assist one another. However when a post was made that was not in relation to the course, another student was quick to indicate that the post was placed in the 'wrong' place. This regulation of the page by the students themselves indicated their respect for the content and purpose of the site. Throughout the course the communication continued to a point where after the exam the students were still using the site to encourage one another, keep in touch with lecturers and fellow students and ask questions in relation to their proposed next steps.

To facilitate the students to develop their career planning skills career counselling sessions were offered to all students within the first week of the Intensive school and also the last. This helped the students to establish dialogue on what they had hoped to achieve out of the Intensive program, focus on identifying their skills and abilities, explore occupational choices, find out how to access labour market information and receive valuable information on pathway options. The TPP curriculum introduces the students to career education and decision making and requires the completion of two assignments, the first being a self-assessment and career exploration exercise utilising the 'myfuture' career exploration web site

(www.myfuture.edu.au), the second being a review of a career decision using a rational logical approach to decision making. The students were also given a presentation from a Career Development Practitioner from the University Careers and Employment Service to reaffirm the services available to them in relation to careers information.

In conjunction with their personal career counselling session this level of assistance proved extremely useful for the students and evidence suggested it assisted with the raising of aspirations. The career development component is an integral part of an enabling program as it is valuable in raising aspirations of any individuals who experience disadvantage whether that be as a result of gender, ethnicity, social class background or disabilities (Watts, 2000). Disadvantaged or marginalised youth who may or may not have had aspirations about career were able to spend time learning about themselves, learning about the world of work, exploring career opportunities and also building on their self-concept through the use of social media. This was all occurring whilst in a safe environment amongst their peers where they would also gain academic skills to prepare them for further study.

An example of this occurring is where one student shared her experience by acknowledging that she had no intention of ever going to University as she thought it was just not an option. She came from a migrant family where no one had ever attended University and whose focus was on her being able to secure employment for financial reasons, and hence this was the path she felt she had to follow. This student had undertaken Year 12 by completing a Vocational Education Training (VET) pathway. Whilst completing her studies she worked in a retail role for a local business and was offered full time employment on completion of Year 12. She was identified by the Career Guidance Counsellor at her school as being a good candidate for the TPP Intensive. Whilst undertaking the TPP Intensive program and completing the career components of the course she established that she had an interest in becoming a primary school teacher and explored her options on how she could achieve this. She successfully completed the TPP and gained eligibility for entry to the Bachelor of Education at USQ.

In post program evaluation surveys 80% of respondents indicated that the TPP Intensive School had assisted them in realising their potential. As a 2012 TPP Intensive School student commented:

“It has helped me structure essays and has made me realise how excited I am to start uni as I originally wasn’t going to go.”

Another 2012 TPP Intensive School student reflected on the process of evolving as an independent self-motivated learner:

“Before going into this program I was so nurtured that I wondered how I would do by myself. It’s become acceptable that I am capable and have the maths and English skills needed to complete assignments in TPP with great satisfaction and also with minimal help. Not something I was used to before doing this course. This course has made me more determined to prove to people I can survive alone with no-one guiding me or always being on guard to help.”

Summary

The Tertiary Preparation Program Intensive School for Year 12 school leavers offered young people from low socio-economic backgrounds an alternative pathway to university, a second chance at tertiary entrance and ultimately for some, a fast track to a better future. By adding *Facebook* and Social Media to the teaching toolkit we increased opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to transition to university culture, to expand their social networks and develop necessary career management competencies. The outcome of the program has been extremely successful with 18 out of the 20 students who completed it continuing on with tertiary study. The students who did not continue on with tertiary study had decided to gain employment and further explore their options in terms of future choices over the next twelve months. It is the intention to continue to offer this program to Year 12 school leavers from low SES backgrounds in order to facilitate and contribute to a positive approach to their lifelong career development.

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